

SOUND POLICY NEEDED

Mid-summer, Queen Charlotte Sound; a Cook Strait ferry laden with eager sightseers carves its way through a glassy sea. Yet what impression does the traveller gain of the way New Zealanders care for their natural landscape as the boat makes its way along this scenic gateway to the South Island? Margaret Peace, a long time battler for the Sounds, here chronicles a history of use and abuse, with a warning of further threats to this special area. She is a Forest and Bird executive member and served on the Marlborough Sounds Maritime Park Board in 1984–85.

From a scenic point of view, the Marlborough Sounds landscape today presents only a bruised and battered remnant of its former glory. That the Sounds are still rated as worthy of visits from overseas tour ships is significant, and a compelling reason to protect and enhance the scenery for the future.

The landscape is not all that has suffered; indeed, the history of European use of land and water resources in the Sounds can be seen today as a sorry saga of wasteful destruction of a uniquely beautiful area for short-lived economic gain.

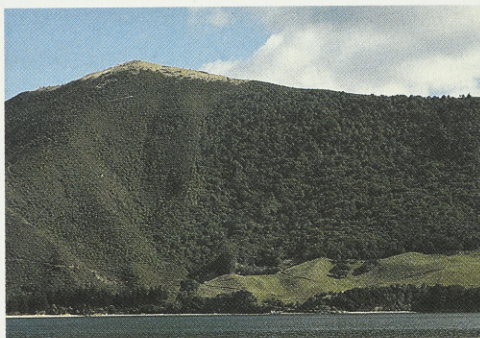
Will that pattern continue? Because the Maritime Park comprises protected areas that are widely scattered and often isolated it becomes doubly important that the lands connecting these are carefully managed, as they are mostly regenerating shrublands. These are the very areas which are now threatened by large scale afforestation, with major companies pressing to establish pine forest over large slices of the landscape.

Sounds history

The entire Sounds area covers some 1500 square km, of which 20 percent is farmed, just over four percent is in exotic forest, leaving about 75 percent as reserves or unproductive land. Native timber logging, burning for farm clearance and by several generations of farmers to prevent bush reversion has severely modified the latter. Despite this, large areas of the Sounds are rapidly regenerating into native forest.

Botanist Dr Geoff Park has estimated that less than 100 hectares of Sounds vegetation remains in its virgin state. Nevertheless, there are still some remnants indicating the original diversity of plant communities, including coastal shrublands, luxuriant lowland mixed podocarp/hardwood forest, montane beech forest and even a small patch of alpine tussock/herbfield on the summit of the highest peak, Mt Stokes.

The ecological significance of the Sounds is underlined by the fact that various plants reach their southern limit of distribution here. They are also home to a number of endemic and endangered animals: Hamilton's frog, the king shag, a giant weta, several paraphanta snail species, yellow-crowned parakeets and yellowheads.



Maud Island, showing the total extent of native bush left after burning for the original farm. The island is the only habitat remaining for Hamilton's frog. Photo: Margaret Peace



The summit of Mt Stokes (1204m), the only Sounds site with alpine vegetation. Healthy tussock and *Olearia* are found inside the fenced plot, but outside the vegetation, including *Celmisia macmahoni*, is threatened by goats and pigs. Photo: Margaret Peace

Historically the Sounds are important: for evidence of early Maori occupation (from the 12th century); for Cook's visits in the late 18th century (marked by a memorial at Ships Cove, noteworthy for being the spot where goats and pigs were first introduced); and for the setting up of the first New Zealand whaling station, at Port Underwood in 1820. Whaling continued in Tory Channel until 1964, by which time there were few, if any, whales left.

Farming difficult

With no thought of preserving natural values, impossibly steep hill country was burned to create farm land. However, farming was hampered by access problems

and the naturally low fertility of the steep clay soils was exacerbated by the disastrous cycle of tree removal, severe erosion, precipitated by frequent, violent rainstorms.

The 1960s saw a network of roads established, serving nearly all Sounds residents, who were also supplied with telephones and electricity. Such services were often installed without much consideration for the environment.

It was a long time before scenic and scientific values were given a high priority, although early this century 5000 hectares of land was set aside as a Climatic and Timber Reserve. In addition, up until the 1970s various scenic and historic reserves totalling some 10,000 hectares were being managed by separate local reserve boards.

Integrated management of reserves only became possible in 1972, when the Marlborough Sounds Maritime Park was established, with a board of 12 members appointed by the Minister of Lands and chaired by the Marlborough Commissioner of Crown Lands.

Today the Maritime Park encompasses a total area of more than 51,000 hectares, including 130 reserves ranging in size from tiny rocky islets to blocks of 5000 hectares. Most have scenic reserve status, five are historic reserves and five are wildlife sanctuaries, nature or scientific reserves. There is also a Sounds Foreshore Reserve, a 20 metre wide strip winding above the high water mark around some 900 km of coastline.

Management problems

The past history of the Sounds has posed a host of problems; more especially today, though, the conflicting interests of the many different users have been difficult to satisfy. From its inception the Park board has been dominated by Sounds farmers and boat owners. Despite regular attempts, no-one with specific conservation or scientific interests managed to get a voice on the board until 1983, when the writer was appointed.

Unfortunately an overall management plan for the Park was not forthcoming until 1985. However, it was always understood the basic policy included: (1) protection of native plants and animals (the paramount aim); (2) protection of scenic, scientific and cultural values; (3) promotion of recreation and cultural values, provided this did not harm the environment; (4) Reduction of exotic animal numbers to as low levels as possible and control of exotic plants.

Too often the board has acted contrary to this policy. For example, it proposed to plant pines on reserves at Mahakipawa and Waimaru, a plan so fiercely contested by Forest and Bird, NFAC and locals that it was changed to a policy of eradicating wilding pines on all reserves.

For years the board promoted the concept of building a major road through one of the most valuable reserves (Kenepuru); this was vigorously opposed by conservationists, the Wildlife Service and the DSIR before the former Minister for the Environment, Russell Marshall, finally quashed the scheme.